New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1956

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1956 PRODUCTIONS

Premieres in Other Years

Original Reviews Appeared In These Volumes

1955 Vol.

Stage Play	*Page*
*Bus Stop	346
*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof	342
*Chalk Garden (The)	227
*Damn Yankees	310
*Desk Set (The)	234
*Diary of Anne Frank (The)	257
*Hatful of Rain (A)	213
*Inherit the Wind	322
*Janus	201
*Lark (The)	206
*Matchmaker (The)	194
*No Time for Sergeants	238
*Pipe Dream	198
Plain and Fancy	382
Red Roses for Me	183
Righteous Are Bold (The)	186
*Silk Stockings	354
Six Characters in Search of an Author	189
*Tiger at the Gates	264
View From the Bridge (A)	272
*Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?	246

1954 Vol.

*Fanny	256
*Pajama Game (The)	324
*Witness for the Prosecution	216

1953 Vol.

*Teahouse of the August Moon (The)	254

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of March 19, 1956*

1956 PRODUCTIONS

Premieres During 1956

Reviews Appear in This Volume

Stage Play	*Page*
Debut	350
Fallen Angels	389
*Great Sebastians (The)	397
Hot Corner (The)	378
Innkeepers (The)	373
King Lear	394
*Middle of the Night	370
Miss Julie	353
*My Fair Lady	345
*Ponder Heart (The)	358
Someone Waiting	365
Streetcar Named Desire (A)	362
Stronger (The)	353
Tamburlaine the Great	386
*Time Limit!	381

Theatre Openings

"My Fair Lady"

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of March 19, 1956*

Theatre Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
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NEW YORK TIMES

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"My Fair Lady"

DAILY NEWS

March 16, 1956

'My Fair Lady' a Superb, Stylish Musical Play with a Perfect Cast

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Everything about "My Fair Lady" is distinctive and distinguished. This musical embellishment of Bernard Shaw's romantc comedy, "Pygmalion," which was presented by Herman Levin last evening at the Mark Hellinger Theatre, is as fine a piece of work, of its kind, as our stage can be asked to give us. Not since "Guys and Dolls" have all the elements of a big musical prodluction—the stars and the chorus, the sets and the costumes, the dances and the plot, the melodies and the lyrics—been blended so artfully and so enjoyably.

Two Fine Stars

"My Fair Lady" is not in the least like "Guys and Dolls," of course. The older musical was rough and hilarious and its melodies were bold. The new one is suave, its wit is dry and its score is less exuberant—but its score and the lyrics thereof fit so beautifully that they should not be done any other way. Oscar Straus wrote some wonderful melodies when he helped make "The Chocolate Soldier" out of Shaw's other romantic comedy, "Arms and the Man"—but he wasn't writing like Shaw. In "My Fair Lady" the composer, Frederick Loewe, and the lyrist, Alan Jay Lerner, have written much the way Shaw must have done had he been a musician instead of a music critic.

There could be no more captivating pair of players than Rex Harrison and Julie Andrews—and even dear Gertrude Lawrence was a no more enchanting Eliza Doolitle than is Miss Andrews. To watch Harrison, the speech professor, take Miss Andrews, the untidy cockney flower girl, and transform her into a high-toned lady, is to watch one of Shaw's pleasantest comedies being acted with spirit and style. To hear them sing is an added delight. Miss Andrews is a gifted music-show prima donna, and Harrison talks his way through his numbers with enormous charm.

It's a big company in "My Fair Lady," and there must be special mention of Stanley Holloway as Eliza's father, the dustman, and Robert Coote as Col. Pickering, the solid Briton who finances Prof. Harrison's experiment in elevating a street waif. Holloway is wonderfully droll in his two numbers, "With a Little Bit of Luck" and "Get Me to the Church on Time." There is another excellent piece of singing and acting by John Michael King, Dennis King's son, in the role of Freddy, the typical English silly boy. And Cathleen Nesbit is perfect as Harrison's aristocratic mother.

Splendid Production

Physically, "My Fair Lady" is splendid and splendorous, with scene designer Oliver Smith and costumer Cecil Beaton collaborating on the quaintly rich atmosphere of the London of 1912. At proper moments, Hanya Holm introduces some light-hearted dances, and the visual high spot of the evening is a scene at the Ascot race track.

With all its extra musical trappings, "My Fair Lady" remains pure Shaw—and the man who has held it all together and made it into an uncommonly stylish production is the director, Moss Hart.

"MY FAIR LADY"

Musical comedy adapted from Bernard Shaw's "Pygmalion," book and lyrics by Alan Jay Lerner, music by Frederick Loewe; staged by Moss Hart; choreography by Hanya Holm; costumes by Cecil Beaton; settings by Oliver Smith; presented by Herman Levin at the Mark Hellinger Theatre, March 16, 1956. The cast:

Mrs. Eynsford-Hill..Viola Roache
Eliza Doolittle...Julie Andrews
Freddy Eynsford-Hill.....
John Michael King
Col. Pickering...Robert Coote
A Bystander...Christopher Hewett
Henry Higgins...Rex Harrison
Selsey Man....Gordon Dilworth
Hoxton Man.....David Thomas
Another Bystander..Rod McLennan
1st Cockney.....Reid Shelton
2nd Cockney.....Glenn Kezer
3rd Cockney.....James Morris
4th Cockney.....Herb Surface
Bartender.....David Thomas
Alfred P. Doolittle.....
Stanley Holloway
Mrs. Pearce...Philippa Bevans
Mrs. Hopkins..Olive Reeves-Smith
Mrs. Higgins..Cathleen Nesbitt
Chauffeur.....Barton Mumaw
Flower Girl.....Cathy Conklin
Flunkey.....Paul Brown

Daily Mirror

March 16, 1956

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

'My Fair Lady' Is A Glittering Musical

• A terrific blend of wit, rhythm and high spirits — a masterpiece.

In G. B. Shaw's "Pygmalion," a cynical professor of speech, to win a bet, transforms a Cockney flower girl into a lady. That was quite a trick. But Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe have done an even more amazing thing. They have turned "Pygmalion" into a glittering musical called "My Fair Lady."

It will only win them, and producer Herman Levin, such moneys as to garner cordial greetings from presidents when they enter the local banks. For, in our book, the new tenant of the Mark Hellinger Theatre is one of the all-time great song-and-dancers. It is at once intelligent and immensely amusing. That's quite a parlay.

WHEN WE FIRST heard that Levin was going to present a musical based on the Shaw comedy, we thought he was off his rocker. But Lerner, with breath-taking skill, has kept the essence of the original, and penned lyrics that beautifully complement the Shavian dialogue. The Lerner-Loewe songs are not only delightful, but advance the action as well.

They are ever so much more than interpolations, or interruptions. They are a most important and integrated element in about as perfect an entertainment as the most fastidious playgoer could demand. In staging the new arrival, Moss Hart matched merits with the three L's, while Hanya Holm has contributed show-stopping choreography.

"My Fair Lady" is notable for elegance and taste. The Oliver Smith decor is smart and sumptuous, as are the period costumes by Cecil Beaton. And Levin has found just the right players to be at home in them. Players of grace and high style.

There's Rex Harrison, suavely charming as the Pygmalion who falls in love with his creation. There's Julie Andrews, completely captivating as the exasperating Galatea. Stanley Holloway, too, is quite wonderful as the Alfred P. Doolittle, trapped into morality by an unwanted legacy.

• • •

ROBERT COOTE IS excellent as the old-school-tie savant, whose wager provokes all the trouble; and Cathleen Nesbit, a grand trouper, sparkles as usual as the speech sculptor's understanding mater. John Michael King, scion of the one and only Dennis, does his pop proud as the professor's penniless, aristocratic rival.

In fact, the entire cast merits a 10-gun salute, with an especial shot for Viola Roache, Philippa Bevans, Olive Reeves-Smith, Christopher Hewett, Gordon Dilworth and Rod McLennan. We doff our chapeau to Robert Russell Bennett, Phil Lang and Trude Rittman for their orchestrations. And a bow must go to conductor Franz Allers, one of the truly fine batoneers of ballet in our time, for distinction on the podium.

In case you have the mistaken notion that brains and fun don't mix, perish the thought. For "My Fair Lady" is a felicitous blend of intellect, wit, rhythm and high spirits. A masterpiece of musical comedy legerdemain. A new landmark in the genre fathered by Rodgers and Hammerstein. A terrific show!

Lucky Levin, Lerner and Loewe—all victims of inspiration at the same time! And lucky you, if you can buy or steal a ticket for "My Fair Lady" over the next few years!

New York Post

March 16, 1956

By Richard Watts Jr.:

When Everything Goes Just Right

Facing one of the most dangerous hazards that a new show can encounter, "My Fair Lady" overcame it in spectacular fashion. The musical adaptation by Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe of Bernard Shaw's "Pygmalion" came to town accompanied by such glowing tryout notices that everyone was looking forward to something notable and would have been satisfied with nothing less. Happily, this is just what they found at the Mark Hellinger Theater last night. "My Fair Lady" is a distinguished and delightful musical comedy, beautifully acted, and it demonstrated again how wonderful the stage can be when everything is going along as it should.

In handing out the allotments of praise, I suppose it would be a good idea to begin with Bernard Shaw. As a librettist, he is immense. His tale of the arrogant and selfish expert on phonetics, who bet he could turn a Cockney flower girl into a lady, has an unsentimental chilliness about it that certainly keeps romantic gush at a distance, but, with just a slight push from his adapters, his story is given the proper warmth for a musical play without losing the Shavian spirit, and his wit, irony and comic imagination mingle superbly and comfortably with the songs and dances.

This doesn't in any way mean that Mr. Lerner and Mr. Loewe thereupon had a soft job on their hands. If the music and the lyrics, as well as the editing they had to do, hadn't possessed the proper mood and the necessary sort of wit to go with the original "Pygmalion," I hate to think what might have happened. As it is, they have been so faithful to the garrulous genius that they have perhaps been a little loquacious, themselves, but they have given us a musical show that is not only richly and continuously entertaining, but has style and the quality of distinction.

Mr. Lerner's lyrics are witty, polished and intelligent, and they also have the great merit of sounding as if they belonged in a work stemming from the Master. Mr. Loewe's music is bright, gay and charming, and it has the enormous value of being a perfectly integrated score that belongs to the book as completely as do the lyrics. I won't try to single out any favorite numbers, because I'm sure it would cause me to slight some excellent ones. I'll merely say that "My Fair Lady" possesses a group of enchanting songs that it will be a pleasure to hear frequently.

It would be difficult to say too much in praise of Rex Harrison and Julie Andrews, who have the leading roles. They would be first rate if they were appearing in a straight "Pygmalion," and they have, in addition, a brilliant skill for musical-comedy playing. Mr. Harrison has just the right arrogant charm for the role of the monstrous phonetics expert, and he has never shown himself a more skillful comedian. Miss Andrews proves that her success in "The Boy Friend" was no accident of type casting. Her flower-girl-into-lady is managed humorously and with rare deftness, and she is at the same time touching and romantically charming.

The lesser roles are also handled to virtual perfection. Robert Coote is a joy as the simple-minded friend of the central figure, Stanley Holloway demonstrates what a fine comedian he is as the girl's worthless and philosophical father, Cathleen Nesbitt's gracious charm makes the language expert's mother warm and endearing, and John Michael King is excellent as a callow young admirer of the heroine. Nor should I fail to applaud Moss Hart's staging, Hanya Holm's choreography, Oliver Smith's sets and Cecil Beaton's costumes. There's no doubt "My Fair Lady" is a triumph.

New York Herald Tribune

March 16, 1956

THEATER

'My Fair Lady'

By WALTER F. KERR

DON'T bother to finish reading this review now. You'd better sit right down and send for those tickets to "My Fair Lady." First things first.

Are you back? Well, almost the most enchanting thing about the new musical at the Hellinger is watching it grow, like Liza Doolittle, before your eyes. Liza, you'll remember, starts out as a tatterdemalion flower-girl, hawking her wares on the grubby streets of London. "My Fair Lady" doesn't start out like a bona-fide Princess, either.

The curtain goes up on a blithe little October-night idyll, with Liza being given a friendly ride in a garbage can while a number of her friends, with brooms over their shoulders, skip out a few Hanya Holm steps. Pleasant enough. Liza is picked up by her phonetics-professor, Henry Higgins, for a quick schooling in the language, and the sly quips Shaw wrote for his "Pygmalion" pair begin to ripple along as before. Still pleasant, if fairly familiar. Old Alfred Doolittle, Eliza's red-nosed dad, weaves on to do "Just a Little Bit of Luck" with his patchwork cronies. Most engaging. It's already a good show, if not a great one.

Then two electrifying things happen. Rex Harrison, as the dedicated Higgins, bounces up off a chair to hunch his shoulders, elevate his eyebrows, wag his finger mightily, and passionately spell out a song called —with great inaccuracy—"I'm an Ordinary Man." Mr. Harrison's slouch is a rhythmic slouch. His voice is a showman's voice —twangy, biting, confident beyond questioning. His leaps over the fashionable furniture are the leaps of a true enthusiast. But most of all Mr. Harrison is an actor, he believes every cranky, snappish, exhilarating syllable of the Alan Jay Lerner lyric he is rattling off, and a fourteeen-carat character simply crashes its way onto the stage.

• • •

It's five minutes later, and Eliza is furious with the man who has called her "a bilious pigeon" while he lashes her into a lady. Alone on the stage, Julie Andrews' enormous eyes flash, her jaw turns to cement, and the glorious venom in her heart rips across the footlights in a howl labeled "Just You Wait." Miss Andrews has caught you, too, now—she is funny, she is pathetic, she is savagely true. Eliza isn't just a doll, she's a demon with a soul you can understand.

• • •

And now that these two utterly credible and magnificently attractive people have asserted themselves — in each case through one of Frederick Loewe's exuberant songs—they are ready for the kill. It comes about halfway through the first act. Miss Andrews has slowly—and perfectly—enunciated a series of vowel sounds. You listen, astonished—astonished because you believe in her so completely that you didn't really suppose she could make it. Suddenly her delight becomes yours. And when Mr. Harrison, together with an equally astonished Robert Coote, bounces irresistibly to the center of the stage and begins to kick out a tango rhythm to the sounds she has just made ("The Rain in Spain Falls Mainly on the Plains") there is no controlling the joy in the theater. Indeed, very little of the number was heard last night; the audience erupted right along with the characters.

After that you couldn't have stopped "My Fair Lady" if you'd invited the authors of "Buttrio Square," "Hit the Trail," and "Carnival in Flanders" to work over the second act. Oliver Smith's double turntables spun round and round to show off ever more dazzling pavilions, ballrooms, and gaslit living rooms. Cecil Beaton's black-white-and-gray costumes for the Ascot races—not to mention the gray-and-orchids he has whipped up for Cathleen Nesbitt —took what breath was left from an already helpless audience. Moss Hart's staging sped by beautifully, Hanya Holm's second-act frenzy at dawn in Covent Garden exploded maniacally, Stanley Holloway and John Michael King hurled song after song from the Loewe-Lerner treasure chest into the Hellinger auditorium. Pace, taste and a triumphant good humor rolled on into the night.

But over it all, and really giving it its substance, rode the two principal and eternally appealing figures: Miss Andrews descending a staircase looking like all the glamor of the theater summed up in an instant, Mr. Harrison tearing his hair in a rage at the constant sex, and both of them together finding humor and honesty in a brilliantly purposeful score.

"My Fair Lady" is wise, witty, and winning. In short, a miraculous musical.

The New York Times
March 16, 1956

Theatre: 'My Fair Lady'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

BULLETINS from the road have not been misleading. "My Fair Lady," which opened at the Mark Hellinger last evening, is a wonderful show.

Alan Jay Lerner has adapted it from Shaw's "Pygmalion," one of the most literate comedies in the language. Many other workmen have built the gleaming structure of a modern musical play on the Shaw fable. They are Frederick Loewe, the composer who collaborated with Mr. Lerner on "Brigadoon" and "Paint Your Wagon"; Oliver Smith, who has designed a glorious production; Cecil Beaton, who has decorated it with ravishingly beautiful costumes; Moss Hart, who has staged it with taste and skill.

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Although their contributions have been bountiful, they will not object if this column makes one basic observation. Shaw's crackling mind is still the genius of "My Fair Lady." Mr. Lerner has retained the same ironic point of view in his crisp adaptation and his sardonic lyrics. As Professor Higgins and Eliza Doolittle, Rex Harrison and Julie Andrews play the leading parts with the light, dry touch of top-flight Shavian acting.

"My Fair Lady" is staged dramatically on a civilized plane. Probably for the first time in history a typical musical comedy audience finds itself absorbed in the art of pronunciation and passionately involved in the proper speaking of "pain," "rain" and "Spain."

•

And yet it would not be fair to imply that "My Fair Lady" is only a new look at an old comedy. For the carnival version adds a new dimension; it gives a lift to the gaiety and the romance. In his robust score, Mr. Loewe has made the Covent Garden scenes more raffish and hilarious. Not being ashamed of old forms, he has written a glee-club drinking-song, and a mock hymn for Alfred Doolittle's wedding.

Not being afraid of melody, he has written some entrancing love music, and a waltz; and he has added something to Professor Higgins' characterization in a pettish song entitled "A Hymn to Him." All this is, no doubt, implicit in "Pygmalion." But Mr. Loewe has given it heartier exuberance. Although the Old Boy had a sense of humor, he never had so much abandon. "Pygmalion" was not such a happy revel.

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In the choreography and in the staging of the musical numbers, Hanya Holm has made a similar contribution. The "Ascot Gavotte" at the races is a laconic satire of British reserve in the midst of excitement, and very entertaining, too. "The Embassy Waltz" is both decorous and stunning. And to the rollicking tune of "Get Me to the Church on Time" there is a rowdy, festive dance that is vastly enjoyable.

Despite all the rag-tag and bobtail of a joyous musical show, Mr. Hart and his associates have never lost their respect for a penetrating comedy situation. Some things of human significance are at stake in "My Fair Lady," and some human values are involved. Thanks to the discerning casting, the values have been sensitively preserved. As Professor Higgins' sagacious mother, Cathleen Nesbitt carries off her scenes with grace and elegance.

•

As Alfred P. Doolittle, the plausible rogue, Stanley Holloway gives a breezy performance that is thoroughly enjoyable. And Robert Coote is immensely comic as the bumbling Colonel Pickering.

But it is the acting of Miss Andrews and Mr. Harrison in the central roles that makes "My Fair Lady" affecting as well as amusing. Miss Andrews does a magnificent job. The transformation from street-corner drab to lady is both touching and beautiful. Out of the muck of Covent Garden something glorious blossoms, and Miss Andrews acts her part triumphantly.

Although Mr. Harrison is no singer, you will probably imagine that he is singing when he throws himself into the anguished lyrics of "A Hymn to Him" in the last act. By that time he has made Professor Higgins' temperament so full of frenzy that something like music does come out of him. Mr. Harrison is perfect in the part—crisp, lean, complacent and condescending until at last a real flare of human emotion burns the egotism away and leaves us a bright young man in love with fair lady. Mr. Harrison acts his part triumphantly, too.

It's a wonderful show. To Shaw's agile intelligence it adds the warmth, loveliness and excitement of a memorable theatre frolic.

New York World-Telegram
and
The Sun
March 16, 1956

'My Fair Lady' Is a Smash Hit

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"My Fair Lady" prances gracefully into that rare class of great musicals. Quite simply, it has everything.

The famed "Pygmalion" story of Shaw has been used with such artfulness and taste, such vigorous reverence, that it springs freshly to life all over again.

The show is dumbfoundingly beautiful to look at, and it is magnificently performed. The songs are likely to be unforgettable, and they certainly are clever.

"My Fair Lady" takes a grip on your heart, then makes you exult with laughter. This is a legendary evening.

Nobody doubts Rex Harrison's expertness, but it is startling to find him so knowing a musical performer. He is perfect casting for the self-centered phonetics professor, with a scholarly gawkiness that is charming.

No Caruso, he knows how to phrase lines, produce his voice well and project clearly.

Julie Andrews moves into a new sort of stardom with her lovely performing of the flower girl Eliza, who is made into a lady. She has the knowing and courage to clearly play and sing, straight front to the audience, without losing the sense of her scene.

There is a winning briskness about her, a real style that offsets her clear beauty. And her comedy is fleet and light, for she makes her points and moves on.

You can find that dominance of stardom in the sweet quick simplicity of "I Could Have Danced All Night," the show's most intoxicating tune, and differently but as strongly in the proud sadness of her neck and chin, after the party.

Star Caliber.

Not so familiar, nor so grandly billed, are Stanley Holloway and Robert Coote, who both give performances of star caliber.

Holloway is Eliza's wonderfully raffish father. He is a gem of an entertainer, sly and effortless with all the gusto of a music hall genius. "A Little Bit of Luck" and "Get Me to the Church" both skip and lilt with the brightest kind of fun. And the latter sets off a dance of rowdy vitality that stops the show for its designer, Hanya Holm.

Robert Coote is a specialist at playing the lovable, silly-ass Englishman, and he is brilliant as Harrison's partner in the effort to make the lady of Eliza.

Much to Remember.

There is much too much to remember about "My Fair Lady" to begin to tell about it all. Alan Lerner's enchanting use of Shaw, both in book and lyrics. The exquisitely funny number that grows from the line about "The Rain in Spain."

The lush and lavish production by Oliver Smith, and the ingenious accents of color in Cecil Beaton's costumes. The fine true split second direction of Moss Hart. The humorous mother of Cathleen Nesbitt, the warm housekeeper of Philippa Bevans, and the cheery song of John Michael King.